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ABSTRACT

Conflict resolutions that do not accord with parents' positions display children's power to influence both the conduct of conflict and the principles families use in conflict resolution. Forty two-parent, two-child families were observed in their homes during three 90-minute sessions in which the children and parents were in separate areas of the house. In each of the families, one child was 2.5 years old and the other was 4 to 5 years old. Observers recorded sibling interactions and parental interventions in sibling disputes, noting issues raised by children in the disputes and principles followed or violated in the parents' response. In the conflicts that were observed, nearly 4,000 issues were raised by the children involved. Parent interventions addressed 45 percent of these issues, solving the conflicts according to the parents' positions 72 percent of the time. Thus, in 28 percent of parent interventions, conflict outcomes were discordant with parental positions. Analysis of child reactions to these outcomes found that children were more likely to have reacted emotionally, and to have refused, defied, and argued with their parents more when outcomes were discordant with interventions than when the two were in accord. (MDM)

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Parent-child negotiation in the context of sibling disputes

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I can remember the excitement that Bell's 1968 article generated. His contention that many of the findings on child socialization could be re-interpreted as child rather than parent effects sparked something of a theoretical revolution in our field. Others advanced similar notions, including my own mentor, Harriet Rheingold. In an article published at the same time as Bell's influential piece, Rheingold characterized the infant as both social and socializing. Even at the outset children have an impact on those around them. As Rheingold so elegantly put it at the time--"out of men and women he makes fathers and mothers."

In the ensuing period increasing attention has been paid to the idea that social development results from processes of interaction between individuals. In the context of the parenting literature this idea has appeal because it represents some of the complexity of family life. However, complex processes are very difficult to examine. In our view, many studies that attempt to examine interaction from a bidirectional perspective fall short of this difficult task. Often we find unidirectional examinations of either parent or child effects, with only cursory acknowledgements of the possibility of reciprocal influences.

Although sophisticated methodologies such as causal modeling, time series analyses and social relations analysis are now being used to explore bidirectional influences, we have taken a simpler approach to the problem. By isolating a particular kind of event for intensive scrutiny, and analyzing, in some detail, the processes involved, we hope to unravel bidirectional influences in interaction and development.

Our focus is on parents' interventions in the conflicts of their young children. When parents intervene in such disputes, they adopt positions on the issues of contention for the children: for example a parent might tell one child not to hit her sister, or ask another to return a toy to her brother. Often the children will stop hitting or return the toy, but at times the hitting will continue, or children will keep the toys. Parents do not get their way; the outcomes of the conflict issues and the positions adopted by parents can be discordant. In our view, these discordant events present unequivocal evidence of bidirectional influences in the family. Conflict resolutions that do not accord with parents' positions display the power that children have to influence both the conduct of conflict and the principles families use in conflict resolution.

Our data comes from nine hours of observation in the homes of 40 families. Each family had two children, one who was two-and-a-half-years-old and one who was between four and five-years-old, at the time of observation. Both parents participated in our study, with fathers, mothers and children being present for three 90-minute observation sessions and mothers and children being present during the remaining three sessions. An observer followed the children around the house and dictated a running account of their interaction and of parent behavior relevant to sibling interaction onto one track of a stereo tape recorder while a separate microphone enabled us to record the conversation of family members on the other track.

When conflicts were observed, we identified one or more conflict issues in terms of contraventions of the potential rights or welfare of one child by the other child. When parents intervened, they generally addressed the issues that the children had raised in their disputes, and each intervention could be coded as either supporting or opposing a principle for the resolution of the conflict. In addition, we coded the outcome of each issue, asking whether principles that parents had endorsed were upheld when the issue was resolved in the family. The following transcript illustrates our coding of issues, parents' positions, and outcomes.

The conflict begins when April touches a little man that is on top of Elizabeth's tower. Elizabeth protests "don't wreck it" and pushes April's hand away. Although Elizabeth seems to be guarding against the possibility of damage to her tower, no actual property damage occurred. The issue we would code is interference/exclusion. These issues are typically two sides of the same coin: April wants to join into the play that Elizabeth regards as private and Elizabeth excludes her sister. April again moves her hand toward Elizabeth's tower and Elizabeth repeats "don't wreck it." April agrees--"okay"--Elizabeth excludes again, now more explicitly--"get away from it" and pushes April away. April reciprocates, and the mutual pushing raises a second conflict issue, physical aggression. The sisters protest, Elizabeth pushes again, April fusses and father

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intervenes. "April, can you play with Elizabeth instead of breaking her tower? That's an important tower to Elizabeth. I don't think she wants you to break it. Maybe you can find some things to help her put on there. You have some tower blocks in the livingroom you could bring to add to it." Father talks about property damage, but at the same time he addresses the issue of interference and exclusion: April should play with Elizabeth, and, by implication, Elizabeth should not exclude her sister. However, when the father finishes, Elizabeth again rejects her sister, threatening "don't put your foot near my tower!" When April yields, we code the outcome as allowing exclusion despite the father's position to the contrary. On the physical harm issue, we code the outcome as allowing the children to push one another, as neither the children nor the father indicated otherwise. To summarize, this conflict comprised two issues. The father intervened on one of the issues, and the outcome of the conflict was discordant with his position in the intervention. Of course, had Elizabeth allowed April to play with her, as father had suggested, the outcome would have been in accord with the intervention. I need to mention one additional convention we have adopted for displaying these transcripts. In the conflicts we observed, close to 4000 issues were raised, parents intervened addressing 45% of the issues and 72% of the time the conflict ended in accord with parents' positions. Thus 28% of the time, or on 492 occasions, conflict outcomes were discordant with positions parents endorsed in their interventions. Given the powerful role of third parties in resolving conflicts in favor of the side they support, and given the relative power of adults in comparison with children, the frequency of discordant interventions and outcomes is remarkable. Our first question concerned how such discrepancies come about. What are family members doing differently that results in children apparently exercising such control over conflict outcomes?

We have begun our quest with a qualitative analysis of discordant resolution of conflict issues. What I will do today is outline the processes we identified in analyses of discordant events, exemplify these processes in several additional transcripts, and then examine quantitative predictions based on our analysis of the processes we feel account for the differences between outcomes and parents' positions.

We find conflict outcomes discordant with parents' positions both when parents remain consistent in their actual interventions and when parents alter their positions as a result of children's opposition. In the first instance, parents endorse a single position, but acquiesce when the children don't accept what the parents propose. In the second instance, parents change their positions when faced with the children's opposition; they seem to be searching for a solution that the children will accept. In both instances, the child reactions to which parents respond include children's fussing or crying, their refusal or defiance of parents, their simply ignoring parents, and their arguments or justifications. As we saw in the example I just reviewed, the children also re-engage their siblings despite parents' attempts to settle the issue, and the children then reach a resolution of their own. Two other types of situations of parental inconsistency fall outside of this general scheme, and present equivocal evidence of the children's influence. When two parents are present mother and father may disagree with one another from the outset, and hence resolutions will be discordant with the position that at least one of them advocates. Of course inconsistencies between two parents can also arise as a result of the opposition raised by the children during the interventions themselves. In addition, some instances of parents' inconsistency arise without any clear explanation related to the children's opposition.

If we review the first example, we see that Elizabeth and perhaps her sister as well completely ignore the father's intervention and re-engage in the conflict, reaching a solution that is at odds with the solution that father proposed. He does not follow-up to enforce his position, but allows his firstborn to exclude her younger sister.

In this next example the Mother is consistent in her interventions, urging her older son, Michael, to include his sister Elizabeth in his play. Michael, argues the issue and Mother eventually acquiesces to his insistent refusal to comply.

Michael and Elizabeth fight over a blanket Michael is playing with, he won't let Elizabeth have it and she cries and tattles to their mother. Mother's response is "...you tell him he has to share with you or there's going to be trouble." Equipped with this Elizabeth goes back to Michael and says "share." Michael counters her with "I don't want to, sorry, but you don't know how to straighten it out..." He puts the blanket away and joins mother in the kitchen while Elizabeth cries in the other room. Mother says to Michael "now listen, she's crying, she's crying" and Michael explains: "well, 'cause I didn't let her fold the blanket, 'cause she doesn't know how." Mother

then asks him: "Can't you teach her?...Isn't it more fun if the two of you play together, and if you show her the way you wanna play?..." Michael doesn't respond and Elizabeth can be heard crying from the other room. "You don't like it if the other kids don't let you play." Michael agrees but adds "I would just go away home and cry." Mother points out that "that's what she's doing is crying. It doesn't feel very good does it?...Please, can't you get along. Show her how you wanna play." Michael responds with "I don't wanna play right now" and Mother gives up her attempts to influence him. Despite Mothers' consitent position and her rejoinders to her son's arguments, Michael prevails.

Our final example involves two major reversals of the Mother's position, the first based on Michael's refusal to accept her proposal, the second arising seemingly out of the blue. April takes a corn popper Michael had previously played with. He protests and April runs to their mother with the toy. Mother requests: "...let April play with it for a while." Michael refuses saying "I want to get it." Mother agrees saying: "As long as you let April play with it later, I'll give it to you now. Will you let your sister play with it?". Michael refuses. "No." Mother's response is "then you don't get it." Michael quickly changes his mind and agrees to let his sister have it after he plays with it. Mother then digresses, saying "No" (you don't get it) to Michael. Michael argues with her: "I can play with it." She asks him: "are you going to let April play with it?" and Michael says "yes." "Do you promise to let her play with it?" He nods. "Michael, do you promise to let her play with it?" "Uh huh." Then mother unaccountably reverses her position. "Let her play with it first." April reaches for the toy, Michael vocalizes and mother repeats "let her play with it first. You go play with something else." Michael refuses saying "no" but releases the toy to April and the conflict ends.

Our general description of processes whereby outcomes are discordant with parents' positions was based on detailed analysis of many of our conflicts, which so far seem to fit the general scheme outlined. That scheme, in turn, provides a number of predictions concerning the contrast between issues in which the outcome is either discordant or in accord with the position advanced by the parents. In line with our qualitative analysis, children will have been more likely to have opposed their parents by fussing and crying, refusing, defying and arguing on discordant than on concordant issues. If children do re-engage their siblings in these contexts, as we suggest, they will also be more likely to yield to their siblings than to their parents when conflicts end. (I should add that we coded yields only when some definite action indicated submission of one person to the demands of another. For example, ignoring physical aggression or efforts to exclude you from play would not be coded as yielding; crying or moving away do constitute yielding.) Parents, for their part, will more often be inconsistent in the positions they endorse in discordant conflicts, both parents will be more likely to have intervened, and the frequency of intervention will be greater.

Our analyses confirm all of these predictions. Children are more likely to have reacted emotionally, and to have refused, defied, and argued with their parents when outcomes are discordant with interventions than when the two are in accord. Considered in relation only to situations in which children actually yield, they are more likely to yield to their siblings when outcome and intervention are discordant than concordant. As for the parents, the prediction of inconsistency, as you've probably already concluded, is a tautology--which certainly helps us to confirm this one. Whenever parents are inconsistent, the outcome must be discordant with the position they sometimes adopt. But we have also found that both parents intervene on more of the discordant than concordant issues and that they intervene more often in that case. We feel that these quantitative analyses confirm the processes that emerged from our qualitative analysis of these events.

In concluding, we re-assert our conviction that children, as well as parents, play a major role in resolving issues of dispute with their siblings. Even when parents intervene, children influence the outcomes of events by their opposition to parents' positions and the processes of resolution by forcing parents to re-consider their children's positions. Parents often seem to be searching for a solution that will be acceptable to the children, or unwilling to enforce a solution that their children vigorously oppose. Conflict resolution in these cases is characterized by much give and take, and we find it remarkable that children of two or four years of age exercise their power so effectively within these families.

Clearly we will work further with this data to elucidate the processes we've discussed today. But we do feel that the basic approach--of detailed analysis of selected interactive events--

such as discord between intervention and outcome--and their comparison with other interactive situations--in this case interventions that accord with outcomes--can effectively reveal bidirectional influences at work in socialization and social development.

Why are conflict outcomes discordant with parents' positions?

Parents:
- **endorse a single position but acquiesce in the face of child opposition**
- **endorse several positions in an apparent attempt to find one acceptable to their children**

Children:
- **react emotionally**
- **refuse, defy, or ignore**
- **argue**
- **re-engage sibling**

- **Mother and Father disagree with one another.**
- **Parents are inconsistent in the absence of child resistance.**

Predictions

Outcomes will more often be discordant with parents' positions when

- **Parents are inconsistent in their positions**
- **More than one parent intervenes on the issue**
- **Frequency of intervention is greater**
- **Children react with emotion, refusal, defiance and reasoning**
- **Children yield to their siblings rather than to their parents**

- **More than one parent intervenes on an issue when parents' positions are discordant with outcome**

- **Frequency of intervention on each issue is greater when parents' positions are discordant with outcome**

	issues and parental positions **discordant**	**in accord**	
proportion of conflicts in which two parents intervene	.103	.066	$X^2_{(1)} = 6.69$
frequency of parent intervention on each issue	3.9	2.4	$t_{(39)} = 6.68$

- **Children react with emotion, refusal, defiance and reasoning when parents' positions are discordant with outcome**

- **Children yield to their siblings rather than to their parents when parents' positions are discordant with outcome**

Probability that children	issues and parental positions **discordant**	**in accord**	$X^2_{(1)}$
fuss	.145	.084	15.01
refuse	.261	.074	59.13
defy	.374	.207	53.13
justify	.313	.207	32.66
yield to siblings	.707	.388	76.39